

# The Storm

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Helen was a cold woman. There was no other word to describe her — she was as austere and aloof as a sheet of gray cliff. Never did her face betray her inner thoughts. Sorrow, happiness, pain, fear seemed never to have pricked her soul. There were no lines in her face to betray suffering. She was silent, cold Helen, and none of her friends knew more than a handful of stories about her guarded existence.

Helen was not beautiful, for at fifty only her sharp, gray eyes seemed to be alive. She was very tall and straight, and her figure was as thin and mannish as it had been thirty years before. Her wiry auburn hair was cropped close to her head, and it swept up from her wide forehead in deep waves. The clear gray eyes were set in well molded sockets, and her high cheek bones swooped to a very square jaw. Her mouth was large and loose, and her aristocratic nose was long and thin, giving a pinched expression to her features. The pince-nez which she wore constantly only intensified that carved countenance. Helen's color was brown, and from the tip of her doe skin oxfords to the peak of her large-brimmed Knox, she was clad in brown — always brown.

She was a spectacular woman without intending to be so. Hers was the fame of driving the first car in town, of smoking the first cigarette, of wearing the first trousers, of flying the first plane. She was daring and, as a young woman, distantly coveted by men. But no man had ever possessed her; no man had ever dared try to confront her. She froze those admirers with her steely eyes and

sent them back to more welcoming front porches.

Helen had not needed men in her life. She had her estate, left to her by a doting father, she had her dogs and horses and cars — and she had her mother. The tall, slim Helen always adored her mother, probably because she was her exact opposite. She was small and helpless and gay, and she understood her silent daughter as well as anyone could understand her. She knew the girl had been overwhelmed by a passionately affectionate father and pampered by two spinster aunts who had so greatly impressed upon her the strength of her own independence that she had come to see the male as a silly animal with lusts for the flesh only. Her mother knew her and pitied her silently.

When Helen's mother died, the great house was sold — everything went; the dogs, the horses, the cars, the Louis XIV furnishings. Helen showed no signs of loss, her face remained set in its chilled lines, her eyes were the same gray. No outward changes marked the great wave of tragedy that had crashed over her. For when Helen lost her mother, she lost the last person, from the millions of people on the earth, who loved her.

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When Helen stood in the doorway of her summer home in Coldpost, she felt an embryo rush of pain in her breast. "The last time I unlocked this door, mother stood behind me, waiting to see in. The last time, she smelt the mustiness of the closed house with me, and

walked about the rooms making little X's on the dust-coated furniture with her finger. The last time, she helped me lift the white, time-powdered sheets from the chairs, and caught the pine-sweet linens as I stood on a ladder, flinging them into her opened arms. The last time . . . . ."

The lost, lonely, empty weight of pain again stirred at the depths of her heart, and she sighed as she made a funny, crooked X on the window pane in the door. She picked up her luggage, piece by piece, and set it inside the door, and then she did a strange thing. Helen closed the door quickly and locked it. The snap of the lock ran through the house, echoing the fear that suddenly possessed her. In her terror, she had locked out the lovely, calm day, so flooded with sunshine and gay, mackerel clouds, she had shut herself off from the happiness of the birds and bright flowered hills, the dark, cool woods, and the roar of the surf beyond. She was isolated in a world of dusty memories, and as she sank into the big chair before the chilled fireplace, a cloud of white dust puffed up from the shapeless sheets that covered it. Then she fell into exhausted sleep and the bright world outside fell asleep with her.

Helen spent long hours cleaning and straightening the house. Her mother's room remained locked, for she hoped to keep her memory imprisoned there. The guest room and long, pine-knotted dining room were shut off, and, when at last the kitchen was shining and fragrant with the clean smell of soap, and the den had been swept until great clouds of choking dust spilled from the rugs, Helen sat down to rest on a hard, straight little French chair that had been her mother's. She propped her elbows on

the chair's arms and clasped her hands under her chin. From the great bay window she could see stretched before her a complete three dimensional canvas. For there lay the sea, with a sullen smirk on its lips, as gray and curling as the smoke of Time. And from it sprang the bosoms of the land, slate and firm in the drugged sun's gaze. There was no sound; no leaf quivered; the sands at the sea's throat were silent, motionless.

Helen picked up a thin, leather-backed book from the coffee table and began to read in the uncertain light:

*Do we ever understand those with whom we have been cast? Can we distinguish a look in the depths of our mother's eyes? We have stirred in the darkness of her womb. We have suckled the milk from her breast and been created through her passion, but can we fathom her laughter and her tears, her savage moods of bitterness? The flesh with which we suffer and work, share longings, is as lost to us, as strange as the wind to the earth's body. It is a foreign, whirling, escaping element so intangible that no fingers of thought can grasp it and hold it. Words are the mere tokens of deceit, for the draughty mind seldom speaks what it believes, nor can it be willed to do so. We are twisted creatures, forever working to elude analysis, fearing capture, never allowing for one pulse of Time the complete giving over of our soul's depths. We are too intricate to formulate; our fancies, too swift for understanding.*

*What in the strange bodies that cloak our misty dreams makes us what we are? Is it the innate qualities of our ancestors? The landing of a Dutchman in New Haven, of a Frenchman on Florida's thumb, the whim of a bourgeois German, the sin of an English cousin? Is it the sad, confused blood in our veins, the*



crooked nose and snarling lips on our faces? Is it the memory of a cruel uncle or a bawdy street scene or the pictures in our nurseries? Is it the hurtling knowledge of sin and bad dreams that casts our fumbling feet into the ruts of the road?

We cry with the dying sun and laugh in a storm's fury. We spit at our friend's feet and elevate to the dignity of saints the strange millions we pass on the streets. We kill the love in our mistress's breast and drop to bottomless pits when a face refuses to return a smile. We thrash through life, hurting, hating, loving ourselves, blind to what we are, exalted in what we seem. And we never know our dearest brothers. We never know ourselves.

There was a low, troubled cough of thunder, and the canvas on the bay window began to sway back and forth, left and right, a crazy whirl of blurred shapes and sounds. The wind scooped great handfuls of foam from the sea. How angry and black that sullen sea had now become! It was being mocked by its terrible brother, the wind, and it was now broiling in its fathoms, calling a death cry to the newly ruffled headlands. The heavens turned a poisoned green, scarred with long, ugly streaks of lightning, and the whole canvas became a demented dance of wind, water, electricity. Helen sat, frozen in a mood of fascinated awe. Her long fingers clutched the arm of the small chair, pressing the gold ring on her little finger into the

flesh. Her face remained the same—taut as stretched gray rubber, immovable.

The storm before her tore at the house like a mad woman, pulling splinters of wood from the sills and slates of shingles from the roof. It roared and screamed its insane song and suddenly the skies turned over and wept sad tears onto the land. Great sorrows sent these tears to flood the earth's majestic paths and drown those cries of frightened men that are so stifling in a calm. The rush and power of this mighty canvas engulfed the sea, stirring the loose flesh at its bottom, and swept the lands toward the sea.

In one great climax, the thunder cymbals clashed and the lightning revealed a finale of a world, subdued and bruised, kneeling before its God.

Helen sat very still, her hands clasped limply in her lap, breathing hard. The sky was now the ~~deepest~~ winter blue and in the peace and stillness that follow all of Time's storms there was a steady drip of rain from the cowed branches of the living. Now, like some repentant artist, stealing into his studio in the young hours of the morning to mix a lovely color for the lips of his portrait — the portrait that he has so ruefully neglected — the sun crept along the horizon, leaving tracks of ruby bands after it. The canvas was glowing and hopeful and calm again, and two jagged streams of tears cut through the frozen face of a woman who had seen and learned a great thing.